

# Facing the Reality of the Ethiopian Encounter

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## Introduction

This paper was prepared as a response to the suggestion that we dedicate a scholarly article to possibly Africa's most famous 'Africologist' on his 82<sup>nd</sup> birthday. That famous person is none other than Prof. G.C. Oosthuizen, an inspiring friend and mentor.

For my contribution, I am indebted to insights which I received from a visit to Ethiopia, and critical observations by my colleague J.A. Loubser, who read a paper on Ethiopia based on a social / historical perspective. My emphasis, however, lies in the field of the theology of The Ethiopian Orthodox *Tewahedo* (one nature) Church. The beliefs of this body are my main concern in this paper. The purpose in investigating it, was to ascertain the role of the Church in leading Ethiopia to the point of achieving its former glory. The intention on my part was to locate a focal point, if any, which would aid the now famous African – and of late, South African – aim of an 'African Renaissance'. My intention involved the examining of the doctrines of the Church to ascertain the social impact of that body. The central observations will be found in the conclusion to this paper. At this point, it should suffice to state that for a country which has made a great impact on human civilization, the deprivation and poverty was staggering. It is a society that has not as yet fully entered the age of print, let alone encountered the industrial revolution. Yet, it is of foundational import for Christianity (if not religion), in Africa (if not worldwide).

I must emphasize that I tried to minimize my use of English text books on the subject (there are very few in print anyway). On the other hand, the Geez manuscripts are voluminous. Unfortunately, many of the famous

theological works were plundered by the British under Napier in 1849 for 'safe-keeping'. The method of personal interviews, consequently, features prominently in this manuscript. These interviews are reflected in the bibliography. (I am thankful for and indebted to Loubser for keeping accurate records of the interviews).

A great deal of general material may be located on the web under Ethiopia most of which, economically speaking, is extremely negative. One may sum up the attitude of the International Monetary Fund (I.M.F.) and World Bank (W.B.) in their assessment of Ethiopia in particular, and Sub-Saharan Africa in general, as follows: Norms for good governance as defined by the above world-bodies are an absolute pre-requisite for funding of development projects in such countries. Financial structures and institutions must 'get their houses in order'. Government interference in the Private Sector must be absolutely minimized. Furthermore, the (illegitimate) government of the Democratic Republic of Congo (D.R.C.) and the genocide in the Great Lakes region are being closely scrutinized by the above institutions. Zimbabwe's land reform and South Africa's excuses for turning a blind-eye to its procedures have not gone unnoticed. Human rights activists find many problems with the excesses of certain African cultural practices, e.g. female circumcision. Africa's *tragedies* do make international headline news. Child slavery and the treatment of the Masarwa by one of our rather well-off neighbours do not go unnoticed. Angola, Mozambique, and most other Sub-Saharan Countries experience different grades of food shortages with, in some places, people facing starvation. The international bodies request an answer. Colonialism and apartheid are now viewed as excuses rather than sound economic reasons for the problems of Africa. The Far-East is constantly referred to as an example of an area that has 'suffered' all the above negative factors yet still promotes economic growth. For example, Hong Kong, Malaysia, Singapore, and numerous others, which are now listed as the 'Asian Tigers', despite their background, deliver vast growth.

With Ethiopia, the situation is not different. Why was it that when the Dutch directed the sugar plantations and the British developed Ethiopia's cotton trade, the country flourished? Anyway, Ethiopia, that majestic country, was never colonized except for a very short period under the Italians (1936 - 1941). The W.B. and I.M.F. are in no mood for excuses. These facts are available on the web (Brander, Levy & Heinz 2002; see also

Loubser 2000). Loubser also points out that the fertile Ethiopia has the world's third lowest per capita income accompanied by its people suffering from the frightening HIV C strain.

This country, with its illustrious history and past economy is virtually bankrupt as a result of its flirtation with Socialism under the Derg rule of 1971 - 1991. Who now will develop its numerous resources? However Abegaz (1994:321) believes that the misgoverned economy and poor general governance of the country require immediate attention. This is a fact, but who will oversee the transformation?

The reality then, is a glorious past with an unknown future. If Ethiopia is to gain or surpass its former glory, it seems as if it should heed the statements of the W.B. and the I.M.F.

It is my contention that Ethiopia must allow its Christian principles to guide it into the future. With the above background in mind, I turn to Ethiopia's Ecclesiastical development. The Church has proved to be the factor holding the same 51 million people together.

## **The Origins of the Ethiopian Church**

One of the most important legends for this church relates to the acquisition of the 'Ark of the Covenant'. According to Kebra Nagast (*The Glory of the Kings: The True ark of the Covenant*) the glory of Ethiopia developed as follows: The Queen of Sheba went to visit King Solomon to ascertain the source of his wisdom. After displaying his splendour, Solomon deviously enticed Sheba into his bed.

At a banquet he fed her many thirst-producing, but sumptuous foods. They went to sleep together in the same room, but on opposite sides of the chamber. A pact had been made after supper that Solomon would not make any advances towards her as long as she did not partake of anything belonging to him during the night in question. Cleverly, Solomon placed a bowl of water in the middle of the room. Unable to endure her unbearable thirst, she snuck out of bed to drink. Solomon, having feigned sleep, immediately, accused Sheba of breaking her word. She then obliged him with her intimate company, leaving for Cush the next day. A son, Menyelek I, resulted from the union.

When Menyelek reached adulthood, he returned to Jerusalem only to astound Solomon by his resemblance to King David. After being crowned King David II, Menyelek longed for his own country. On deciding to take his leave some of the nobles wished to accompany the Crown Prince. However, they desired to remove the Tabernacle and the Ten Commandments and re-situate them in Ethiopia, the New Zion (Nagast Brooks 1998:17 - 81). The Ark, while 'stored' somewhere near Axum, is existentially present in every Ethiopian Orthodox Church. A replica of the ark is displayed during *Timket*, the time of the Epiphany, commemorating the Baptism of Jesus in the Jordan (Merah 1 1999:74).

According to Ethiopian tradition, the country followed Judaism as understood by the nobles who had left Jerusalem with Menyelek I. One still finds a remnant of Jewish worshippers called 'Felashas'. Most of these 'Jews' were airlifted to Israel in the 1970's to avoid further persecution. Loubser and I visited them at Gondar and Bahar-Dar, where their synagogues were evident and in use. Apart from tradition, very little is known of this group's origins. Are they ethnic Jews, the descendants of the nobles accompanying Menyelek? Who knows? The Orthodox theologians disregard them completely. The Orthodox Church maintains though, that the Falashas' form of Judaism is pre-Talmudic (Church of Ethiopia 1997:3). In our discussions with various Christian Priests, it appeared that the Falashas were simply intransigent Ethiopians who refused to convert to Christianity (Discussions 1999).

It is assumed by the Orthodox faithful that Christianity came with the arrival of the Eunuch, who on returning from Jerusalem, met Philip and was baptized by him (Merahi 1999:31). The role of Frumentius in 330 A.D. is acknowledged as the official link to the Orthodox line of Churches as he had been ordained and commissioned by Athanasius, Bishop of Alexandria in 334 A.D. From that time, Christianity became the official religion of Ethiopia and the country flourished. The decline of Ethiopia began with its frequent wars against Islam, whereby the country was denied its usual trade routes.

Ethiopians, as a result of their long Christian heritage, have the moral fiber to turn the tables on their critics. The country needs, however, to return to its Christian roots via the pathway of primary education and medical development all involving a Christian direction and work ethic.

## **The Place of the Trinity in the Ethiopian Renaissance**

The Ethiopian Orthodox Church (EOC) places great emphasis on the place of the Trinity in the Godhead. In the Trinity, the Father is the heart, the Son is the word and the Holy Spirit is the life principle (breath). Not only is the Trinity active in the world, but it is especially active in Ethiopia, God's country. Ethiopia is directed by the Father's heart (love) acting in His word, for to all Semites a word is not static but active, causing something to happen. The Father spoke his word in the Son, and 'it was so', as envisaged in the creation story (Tensae Publishing House 25). The trinitarian God, is an Acting God. It is this trinitarian concept that led the E.O.C. to oppose the Derg by portraying the E.O.C.'s role as that of the country's socially concerned body. The E.O.C. took the lead in the instituting of social programmes. This act by the Church involved developing the fishing industry, food distribution, family therapy and re-forestation (Meadot 1988:16ff; Loubser 11). The resources of the E.O.C. are extremely meager though (Pankhurst 1990:181). God, in Ethiopian thought, is the God of Action for the people of Ethiopia.

The Father who has sent the Son and the Holy Spirit to redeem the world, is the same Father who causes His face to shine upon Ethiopia. Saints, musicians, hymn writers and the presence of God's Ark in that country all help to bring joy to the heart of God. Unfortunately, in days gone by, the land had neglected to acknowledge the presence of the Triune God in its midst, by failing to give heed to fasting and obedience to the liturgy. As a result of the above neglect, greed and disrespect for the clergy and one's brothers and sisters had become the order of the day (Merahi 1999:49f). However, since the presence of God, through the Ark, in Ethiopia, God's Angels, Raphael and Michael, continue to care for the land and its peoples.

## **The Position of Mary in Ethiopian Thought**

The E.O.C. clearly teaches that Eve, the mother of humanity, while leading humanity into sin, has been redeemed by Mary the mother of God. In a painting at a church on an island in Lake Tana, one sees Satan seducing Eve at the tree of knowledge. Adam does his best to drive the snake away, but Eve determinedly participates of the forbidden fruit. Eve attempted to reach up to the status of God despite Adam's attempted intervention. Mary, on the other hand, did not attempt to disobey God, but humbly stood at the foot of

the cross. God, therefore, has blessed womanhood, for Mary has reversed the consequences of Eve's sin by her humility. Jesus, because of Mary's faithfulness to him has raised her to the status where her humility is a reason for worshipping her. The worship of Mary's humanity leads directly to the next point, where, in the doctrine, due to the divine nature in Christ, Mary replaces Jesus' humanity - hence the worship of the 'mother of God'.

### **The Monophysite Doctrine of Christ**

Protestants, Catholics and the Greek Orthodox Church, following Chalcedon, teach that Christ is one person with two natures, one divine, the other human. The E.O.C. together with its sister churches, the Malabar Syriac, Coptic, and Armenian churches all without exception, believe that Christ had but *one* nature, a divine nature. The E.O.C. goes no further than Nicaea (The Ethiopian Orthodox *Tewahedo* Church 1996:126.), hence the word Monophysite, one nature. The Council of Nicaea, 351 A.D., clearly states that the Son is of one substance with the Father begotten not made. Chalcedon, however, in 471 A.D. accepted to the Nicene Creed, but added the following: Christ is consubstantial with the Father as to the divine nature and is consubstantial with us in his manhood. Such a thought was totally unacceptable to the E.O.C. and its sister churches, Christ is divine. That means that He is God wrapped in a human body. All his actions, all He is, even as He walked this earth, was God in the form of human flesh. In fact it was only His 'covering' that was human. Consequently, on the cross, while the human appearance succumbed to death, His soul or nature returned immediately to the Father. There is thus no humanity whatsoever in the risen and ascended Christ according to the Patriarch's secretary (Loubser & Pitchers 1999). This understanding of the E.O.C. runs contrary to the tenets of the Greek Orthodox, Roman Catholic and Protestant Churches, all of which accept the Chalcedonian definition.

Due to this peculiarity of the E.O.C., constant conflict with the Portuguese explorers was the result. The final outcome to this saga meant that the Jesuits as well as all other Catholics were deported from Ethiopia. The E.O.C.'s faithfulness to its traditions is admirable although misguided, leading to absolute bigotry, from either Catholic or Protestant standpoint. Loubser and I encountered much resentment from certain E.O.C. priests in Addis Ababa when we attempted to discuss theological differences. As

outsiders, we gained the impression that we were welcome only to listen, and not question. Leading out of the above encounter, it soon became apparent that while tourists' dollars were welcome, the same did not apply to the individual foreigners. Africans from other part of the continent may learn that, being true to one's considerable heritage, requires transparency.

## **The Concept of Salvation**

The doctrine of sin seems extremely vague to one who approached the above church from the 'outside' as a Protestant. The text books that I consulted had nothing to say on the subject. On approaching the church leaders, however, it appeared to us that sin consisted mainly in a failure to observe the liturgy by which they meant feast days and holy days. Included in the idea of sin was a failure on the part of the laity to give alms to the church who would then distribute those gifts to the priests as well as the needy. Sinning on the priests' part was limited to greediness, which also included failure to pay workers and meet the needs of the poor. Immorality was frowned on as was polygamy. It thus appeared that sin was limited to the transgression of a form of institutionalised legalism.

Salvation was the natural result of good works. An example of salvation in application was revealed in a painting on the Lake Tana Church at Gondar. Here one noticed the picture of a cannibal who had eaten more than 100 people, weighed in the balances for his sins. One day he gave a cup of cold water to a needy individual and immediately he found forgiveness. The attending priest quoted a Biblical verse in explanation to this act, pointing out that Jesus had said that in as much as you give a cup of cold water in my Name to the needy, you give that water to me. The cannibal was instantly forgiven all his previous sins and rejected his cannibalism. Much of this sounded strange to Loubser and to me, individuals, who had been brought up in a tradition characterised by belief in 'Justification by faith'.

One may quite accurately state that much of the Ethiopian culture is retained in a manuscript and art form portrayed in their churches. The distribution of Bibles was extremely limited, while bordering on the unaffordable as well.

Sermons as reflected in the practices of churches elsewhere are unknown. Liturgy, rather, plays the most significant role in the Ethiopian Church, and respect for the Liturgy, including the kissing of the cross,

results in the many Christian blessings one may receive. Forgiveness of sin by kissing the cross is foreign to Protestants.

By an overabundance of 'good works' one may maintain a relationship with the ancestors, or those who may have passed from this life to the next with many of their sins unforgiven. Through a transfer of merit, one may assist to set free the souls in the 'nether-world'. This action seems to differ from African 'ancestor' worship where one receives blessings from those who have died. The concept, to my thinking, relates to the E.O.C.'s understanding of Purgatory.

There are similarities between Islam as we understood it and the E.O.C. Of interest to me was that Zewde agreed with Loubser for the former states that the differences between Christianity and Islam were not pronounced in earlier times of worship (Zewde 1998:6). This factor is underscored by the calls to worship, the removal of shoes on entering a place of worship and the general laws of cleanliness. The dietary laws are the same. Both abstain from the same foods as required by the book of Leviticus. These laws are requirements for salvation.

### **The Doctrine of the Last Things**

One may ask how important is such a doctrine for the 21st Century? The interesting issue lies in the fact that the E.O.C.'s doctrine of the above as interpreted by its priests emphasizes the point that Ethiopians are the faithful remnant of the old rejected Israel. The place of Christ's return is likely to be at Lalibela. As proof of Ethiopia's status as the 'New Israel', one need only look to the name of the last King of Ethiopia, Hayla-Sellase I, Lion of the Tribe of Judah (deposed in 1974).

### **The E.O.C.'s Relationship with other Churches**

The E.O.C., as seen earlier, maintains an inter-communal relationship with its sister Orthodox Churches. It is also a part of the W.C.C. Because of its Monophysite doctrine, any act of full communion could only take place should the Roman Catholics, Greek Orthodox and Protestants return to the doctrine of Christ as having one nature as espoused by the E.O.C. This doctrine was taught by St. Mark in Egypt, St. Matthew in Ethiopia and St. Thomas in India. At this point, discussions on this issue are in progress (The Church of Ethiopia, Past and Present 1997:99-100).



Being the 'True Church', the E.O.C. opposes proselytism among its flock as they alone retain the apostolate tradition according to Patriarch Abba Paulos of Ethiopia (The Church of Ethiopia, Past and Present 1997:8). We did not find our interaction with the E.O.C. a very happy one.

The re-action of the E.O.C. to other churches is understandable in the light of Roman Catholic attempts at repression, finally encapsulated by the Italian Catholic invasion in 1936. (According to the E.O.C. the Italian invasion is dated 1928 as Ethiopia uses the Julian calendar and ancient Hebrew time). The Church further suffered great martyrdom under the Communists, yet it stands as a beacon to God's care for Ethiopia. (The Church of Ethiopia, 1997:18)

### **Theological Training in Ethiopia**

On visiting the Holy Trinity Theological Seminary, Loubser and I were impressed by the high theological standard of the Seminary. The library, which had, prior to the Derg regime, been housed at the Addis Ababa University, was excellent. Its one and only computer did not work however, but the books were of a very high standard. Protestant commentaries and theological works abounded.

The lecturers with whom we held a Seminar on the 'Third Quest for the Historical Jesus' were very highly educated. The Malabar Church Indians (classified by the Ethiopians as whites), had been educated at the famous Serampore University in India, having read for Master's and Doctor's degrees. A matter that concerned us was that the students from the Seminaries were not acceptable to the E.O.C. they were considered somewhat liberal theologically speaking. The E.O.C., according to the Seminary teachers, preferred the method of teaching priests at the local churches, where a theological curriculum was in place.

### **The Reaction of the Ethiopian People to Famine and Hardship**

Ethiopia is a country of great beauty, but a country of contrasts with famine and hardship ever at hand. The very moving book by Azeze, *Unheard Voices: Drought, Famine and God in Ethiopian Oral Poetry* under the section on Perceptions of God points out that the starving peasants hold God responsible for their plight and numerous deaths. God must, they feel, be

called to account for allowing such a predicament to befall the country. 'God is presented as a negligent and thrifty master' (Azeze 1998:98f). One of the poets, while holding God accountable for all the country's famine and sorrow, points out that the people have failed to give due respect to Mary as part of their (the people's) obligation to her (Azeze 1999:101). To sum up the above section, both the divine and the human are involved in the blame for Ethiopian tragedies in Ethiopia from the poet's point of view.

### **The E.O.C.'s Contribution to Transformation: What are the Lessons for South Africa?**

For the following section, I have relied to a large extent on *The Church of Ethiopia, Past and Present*. 1997. EOC: Addis Ababa. Loubser's paper on 'Two Revolutions Behind', remains an outstanding source for Geo-political deductions on Ethiopia. I have made extensive use thereof.

A clear statement of the Church's mission is reflected below. 'The fundamental Mission of the Church is to provide spiritual and social services to humanity' (COE P.P. 1997:94). One should not lose sight of the fact that this book carries the Imprimatur of the Patriarch. Additionally, the E.O.C. is stated to be involved in directing plans for road-building, the establishment of clinics, areas for live-stock breeding, developing plans for self-help schemes, the sinking of wells and the provision of orphanages. It is negotiating with all the warring parties both inside and outside its borders while extending hospital services to the populace (COE P.P. 1997:97). Loubser and I, on our short stay, failed to witness any church action in the above areas. What we did observe was the tremendous supply of humanitarian aid from outside Ethiopia. The above scenario did not seem to me to hold out any hope for Ethiopia inspiring an African Renaissance in any way. The country after the Derg Rule, remains at the point of collapse, morally, socially, economically, and with regard to health (HIV/Aids). Ethiopia, that great Empire of the past, offers the third lowest per capita income in the world to its people. Up to half the children under five years of age are malnourished, while millions of Ethiopians depend on foreign aid for food (Loubser 2000:3). Yet we encountered constant xenophobia accompanied by accusations of acting like colonialists. 'Leave us alone' seemed to us to represent the prevailing attitude (Loubser 2000:4), and this attitude from a country that was colonized for only six years! It was clear to

us that for the country to prosper, it had to heed the call of the I.M.F. and W.B. for good governance. Furthermore, Ethiopia will have to change its attitude to foreign aid and tourists. The E.O.C., however, must teach its people to alter their outlook towards those who wish to assist. No one is really interested in phasing out Ethiopian culture. Rather, there is a genuine desire by outsiders to assist that country. The aim is that Ethiopia should be self-sufficient. Ethiopia, through the unlimited influence of the E.O.C., should seek partnerships in an attempt to enter the industrial age. Ethiopia in line with the rest of Africa needs to do 'some soul searching' and then mend its ways by linking up with outside help, e.g. the I.M.F. and W.B.

There is a need to involve women in Ethiopia to a far greater extent not only in the role of the E.O.C. but in society as well. Female circumcision is an abomination and the human rights activists should give this issue their immediate attention. It is a fact that in earlier times women played a large role in government as under Emperor Yaqob (1434 - 1468) but their place in the E.O.C. is limited. Here we have an example of the state treating women in a manner better than the church. Pankhurst, in his, *A Social Study of Ethiopia* (1990:67-72) acknowledges the honour that Ethiopia gives to Mary. It is perhaps surprising that women play such a lowly role in the churches. Their positions are limited to the status of church helpers as they are not entitled to ordination in any form. The E.O.C. must give this matter its attention in modern society (Pankhurst 1990:329).

Does the government and E.O.C. countenance slavery? It is very difficult to offer any final conclusions except to say that the law allowing pagans to be enslaved does not appear to have been rescinded by any law as yet, even though slavery is frowned upon (Pankhurst 1990:328).

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### **List of Interviewees**

Burkhard, Dr. Peter, Mekane Jesu Church, Addis Ababa.

Demissie, Dr. Abebe, Acting Head of the Centre for Biodiversity.

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Gebregziaber, Kashaz, Religious journalist at Patriarchate, Addis Ababa.

Gebbru, Solomon, Patriarchate, Addis Ababa.

Melaku, Lule, Holy Trinity Theological Seminary of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church.

Molinaeux, Dr.Louis, Polio expert, previously medical practitioner near Gondar.

Muche, Bilal, Western Gojam Culture Tourism and Information Department, Bahir Dar.

Tedik Tsega, Aba Kale, EOC Priest, Gondar.

Tekle Haimanot, Aba Wolde Tinsael, EOC Priest, Bahir Dar.

Vaidian, Father M.M., Holy Trinity Theological Seminary of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church.

Wolde Hanna, Minasse, Patriarchate, Addis Ababa.

Yigsaw, Getnet, Tourist guide, Gondar.